

# **Affiliated University College Students: their socio-economic background, educational experiences and educational and occupational aspiration**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The Affiliated University Colleges are a new type of institution of higher learning that was first established in 1991 on the basis of one Affiliated University College (AUC) for each province, the temporarily merged N.E. province being considered as two provinces for this purpose. There were two primary purposes to be served by the establishment of AUCs, namely, to make University level higher education available to a larger number of students than the traditional universities could accommodate and provide job oriented vocational courses in higher education supplementing the academic degree courses offered in the Universities. The course planning, curriculum transaction and examinations were to be supervised by a national university, that awarded the Diploma at the end of two years' study. Though immediate provision was not made for AUC students to proceed to a degree it was expected that after a few years' professional experience these students would be able to join some Higher Educational Institute (HEI) where they could proceed to a degree in technology, Although the establishment of AUCs was vehemently opposed by the majority of University students, some University Faculty, educationists and politicians of the then opposition, there was a very good response to the call for applications for admission, twenty five thousand applications being received for the two thousand places in all AUCs.

A pertinent question that arose in this context was how would the establishment of a new type of tertiary educational institution change the social composition of the university student population. Would the clientele of the new institutions be drawn equally from all socio-economic groups or more from particular socio-economic groups.? Would the establishment of these institutions lead to the emergence of a binary system of higher education similar to that which existed in United Kingdom prior to 1993? The answers to these questions were sought from the present study.

## **2.0 The Survey**

The present survey of AUC students was undertaken in late 1992 at the time of their entry to the AUCs. Its overall aim was to find out the characteristics of the AUC students and how they differed from the students of conventional universities. Specifically the three major aspects of the students'

- (a) socio -economic background
- (b) past educational experience and
- (c) educational and occupational aspirations.

were studied.

A questionnaire was administered to the students who had gained admission to the Southern Province AUC. A total of 72 students responded to this questionnaire. The data gathered by the questionnaire were analyzed under the sub-headings of

- 3.1 Basic information
- 3.2 Socio-economic background
- 3.3 Educational experience
- 3.4 Future Educational and vocational aspirations.
- 3.0 Review of Pertinent research Literature

As a primary objective of the present study was to find out how the sample of AUC students differed from the students of conventional universities, a perusal of studies carried out on the characteristics of university student population, their socio-economic background, choice of courses of study, educational experience and vocational aspirations at various points of time was done.

Strauss (1950) in his study of university entrants stated that the vast majority of the student population came from families in the upper socio-economic categories, that is the professional, managerial and entrepreneurial class. Jayasuriya (1965) found that with the expansion and equalization of opportunities in certain fields of primary and secondary education, the social base of those entering higher education began to broaden, especially after the Swabasha intake in the early 1960s. Nearly 2/3 of the students were in receipt of financial assistance compared with one-fifth to one-third in the 1950s. Gunewardena (1974) found this trend being strengthened in the following decade and that the percentage receiving assistance had increased up to 43.7 per cent in 1970.

Intervention strategies introduced in the 70s through the mechanism of district quotas and standardization had a visible impact on the social composition of the university student population. Thus Jayaweera (1984) reports that a little over half of the students admitted to university in 1977 came from families where the employment status of the father was relatively low. However, even in 1997, of the total number of students, 9.8 per cent of the fathers were engaged in professional and managerial jobs and 10.1 per cent were teachers, marking up a total of 19.9 per cent whereas only 5.5 per cent of the male population in the country (Department of Census and Statistics, 1981) were in professional and managerial jobs (including teaching). In 1990-91, the percentage of students with fathers in the above categories of occupations had increased to 21.2 per cent, partly because of the 'freezing' of numbers selected for Arts. On the whole, though, access to university education had broadened and students from higher socio-economic groups were finding it easier to enter university.

Sri Lankan researchers had also noted a relationship between socio-economic background of university students and their choice of a course of study. Jayaweera (1963) found a large concentration of Arts students (over two thirds) from a markedly rural and lower social background and that the upper and middle classes were more evident in the Medical and

Science Faculties. This was reiterated by Uswatearchchi (1974) with the heaviest concentration of students (65 per cent) with fathers in prestigious occupations being in Medical Faculty, and a 7 per cent of Arts students being from a similar background. Gunewardena's (1974) study showed that the increase in the number of students drawing financial assistance was a pre-ponderant feature of Arts Faculties more than of students in Medical and Engineering Faculties. Jayaweera (1984) found in the study of 1977 entrants also, clear differences in access to courses with 42.3 per cent of the Arts students having fathers employed in the professions (including teachers). Sundar et al (1983) too found that a large proportion of students entering professional and science courses were from fairly affluent families and that this tied up with a parallel situation in terms of fathers' occupation and education. Gunewardena (1980) also found that the cohort of Arts graduates studied by her tended to be overwhelmingly from a lower socio-economic background. Even in 1990-91, the situation had not changed much with a high proportion of students with fathers in professional groups in Medicine (33.7%) and Engineering (36.8) per cent.

Where the secondary school experience of university students was concerned, Strauss (1950) found that during a time when education was restricted to the elite, the successful university entrants had come mainly from elite state schools and private schools. By the 1960s, a greater expansion of secondary education had taken place and in 1967, only 8 per cent of the students were drawn from private schools and 22 per cent from prestigious schools (Uswatearchchi, 1974). In 1977, the proportion of students from private schools had decreased further (3.8 per cent) while 20.2 per cent came from prestigious schools and 74.00 per cent from other state schools and Pirivenas. Equally noteworthy is the fact that 50 per cent of the Arts students were from non-prestigious schools. (Jayaweera, 1984). Gunewardena's study (1980) also buttressed this feature by showing that the secondary schools attended by the Arts graduates had been mainly non-prestigious schools.

Another aspect into which the researchers had inquired into was the vocational aspirations of university students. Strauss (1950) found that 36.4 per cent of university students and 63.8 per cent of women students had not made any decision regarding their future vocation, but 57.3 per cent of men and 21.7 per cent of women were expecting professional and managerial jobs. In Jayaweera's study (1984) a total of 27 occupations (all professional or middle level) were preferred by the 1977 entrants.

Sundar et al (1983) identified two categories of employment preferences: (1) those that were directly relevant to the course followed and (2) those that were not directly relevant. When the responses of those who indicated a job preference directly related to the course followed were considered, among the professional students, 77 per cent aspired to secure professional occupations while 19 per cent preferred teaching/research and technical jobs. The bulk of the science and arts group preferred teaching/ research and technical occupations with only 31.7 per cent and 9.2 per cent respectively in the two groups indicating a preference for executive positions.

When preferences for occupations not directly relevant to the course followed were considered, it emerged that of the professional group 36.6 per cent preferred executive and teaching/research/technical occupations with professional appointments receiving the second highest preference (28.9 per cent). In the Arts group, 28.9 per cent preferred executive and teaching/research/technical positions, while another 23.5 per cent was satisfied with clerical appointments.

Among the reasons given by the undergraduates for the above job preferences were good income, security of employment, good career prospects, job satisfaction, ability to improve competence, scope for use of special talents, work environment and the availability of opportunity for further studies. (Sundar et al). (1983)

The few studies of university students reviewed above indicate that with the passage of time the social composition of student population had changed to a considerable extent. The total student population in the recent years had a better representation of students drawn from lower social classes but the social stratification outside the university was clearly replicated in the student representation in different courses of study. The hierarchical structure of different faculties corresponded to the hierarchical social structure not only due to differential educational aspirations but also due to differential educational achievement stemming from the difference in the quality of education provided in a system of unequal schools.

#### **4.0 Analysis of Data**

##### **4.1 Basic information about AUC students:**

There were more females among the respondents (52.8 per cent of the total). By ethnicity, the overwhelming majority was Sinhalese (92.7 per cent) while in religion, the predominant majority was Buddhist (88.9 per cent) Most of the respondents were aged 21 - 25, as could be expected from a group on the threshold of their higher education.

They came from five administrative districts of the country, which is explainable by the fact that the respondents were drawn from one AUC, The Southern Province AUC.

The majority of the students however were rural residents, those who reside in Pradeshiya Sabha areas (73.6 per cent)

##### **4.2 Socio-economic Background of the AUC Students**

A main focus of the study was the socio-economic background of the AUC students. The students were requested to furnish information about their parents' occupation, educational level and income, to gauge their socio-economic background.

The respondents reported that 69 out of the 72 mothers were unemployed. The three who were employed were a teacher, a stenographer and a business woman.

To gain an understanding of the social standing of these parents in the community, the occupations were classified according to the Occupational Prestige Scale devised by Gunewardena (1991).

Table 1

Class	No
I	-
II	2
III	1
IV	12
V	17
VI	29
	61

The above table brings out the fact that as far as the parental occupations are concerned, the sample of students does not portray the distribution of occupations within the country. Class II of the Occupational Prestige Scale is represented here by two fathers - a school principal and a teacher, class III by a coordination secretary, whose occupational prestige is difficult to gauge, even though he is classified under class III. On the whole, it was apparent that the student population draws mainly from the lower strata in society. The fact that only three mothers were reported to be employed may be due to their low socio-economic background and to their being mainly from rural areas.

Secondly, the data relating to the parental level of education was perused. (Table 2)

Table 2

Educational Level	Father		Mother	
	No	%	No	%
Up to grade 5	31	43.1	25	34.7
Grade 6-10	22	30.6	26	36.3
Completed G.C.E. (O.L)	15	20.8	16	22.2
Completed G.C.E. (A.L)	1	1.4	4	5.6
G.C.E. (A.L) +	1	1.4	-	-
University Degree	1	1.4	-	-
Don't know	1	1.4	1	1.4
Total	72	100.0	72	100.0

The above table shows a close relationship with the data collected in respect of parental occupations, for more than one third of both parents have had an education up to Grade 5 (primary education) only. The number possessing a secondary, collegiate or higher education is negligible. The data revealed that except for one lone respondent, all the others would have been the first generation to receive higher education. Twenty five per cent or the respondents had, however, stated that they have siblings who have received a university education.

Finally, we looked at the situation regarding the family income of the respondents. (Table 3)

Table 3

Monthly Family Income	No	%
Less than Rs. 2500/=	53	73.6
Rs. 2501 - Rs. 5000/=	9	12.5
Rs. 5001 - Rs. 10,000/=	4	5.6
More than Rs. 10,000/=	6	8.3
Total	72	100

Table 3 reiterated the fact that the respondents were on the whole an underprivileged group, About three fourths of the respondents were receiving an income of less than Rs. 2500/= a

month, which is the amount paid by the state to the poorest of the poor, the Jana Saviya recipients.

### 3.3 Educational Experiences of the AUC Students

The second aspect into which the questionnaire probed was the educational experiences of the AUC students. Normally two years elapse before a student who sat for G.C.E. (O.L) Examination appears for the G.C.E. (A.L) Examination. During the recent past, however, due to the turbulent political situation in the country, this period has lengthened and normally, at least a four-year gap would separate the sitting for G.C.E.(O.L) Examination and the admission to a tertiary education institution for a student. On the basis of such a calculation, the students who entered AUC in 1992 would have sat for their G.C.E.(O.L) in 1987 or 1986. The response of our respondents showed, however, that the year in which they sat for G.C.E.(O/L) had varied between 1980 and 1987.

The extension of this gap to almost seven years could have been due to several reasons. It is probable that some of these students had sat for either or both of the examinations. G.C.E.(O.L) and (A/L) more than once. The prolongation would also be due to the fact that some of them who were employed, following other further education courses or languishing at home unemployed due to non -availability of opportunities for education or employment, had opted to follow courses in the AUC, the first time this chance was offered to them.

What is noteworthy is that for almost 85 per cent of the respondents, nearly seven years elapsed between the sitting for G.C.E.(O.L) Examination and admission to tertiary education as compared to 2 or 3 years in many a developed country. It poignantly points out the paucity of opportunities for higher education, especially for the youth who do not excel in their studies.

In view of the stratification that is evident in most countries. When tertiary educational institutions are established outside the University system it was relevant to examine the performance of our respondents at both G.C.E. (O.L) and (A.L) examinations. Our earlier analyses of these students' socio-economic background showed them to be drawn from the lower socio-economic strata, even though, on the surface, there was no reason for such a situation, as both the universities and AUCs provide free education.

The following tables (Table 4 and 5) show the classification of the respondents according to their level of performance at the two examinations. Here, the numerical scores were assigned to the grades received by the students eg: Ordinary Pass - 1, Credit Pass - 2, and Distinction Pass - 3, at G.C.E. (O.L) and S - 1, C - 2, B - 3 and A - 4 at G.C.E. (A.L) and the total score thus obtained was classified into 4 levels - Excellent, High, Moderate and Low.

Table 4

**Performance of Respondents at G.C.E. (O.L) Examination**

Level of performance	No	%
Low (0-6)	--	--
Moderate (7-12)	28	38.9
High (13-18)	44	61.1
Excellent (More than 18)	--	--
Total	<u>72</u>	<u>100.00</u>

It is worthy of note that all the respondents are placed in the two levels of moderate or high performance. As AUCs come under the tertiary education system, there was no possibility of low performers obtaining admission into these colleges. Those who excel are also excluded because they would normally gain admission to the universities.

The same situation is replicated at G.C.E. (A.L)

Table 5

**Performance of Respondents at G.C.E. (A.L) Examination**

Level of performance	No	%
Low (0-4)	--	--
Moderate (5-8)	13	18.1
High (9-12)	59	81.9
Excellent (More than 18)	--	--
Total	<u>72</u>	<u>100.00</u>

A comparison of the above two tables indicates a general compatibility between the performance at the two examinations. Some of the students who were in the moderate performance category at G.C.E. (O.L) are seen to have bettered their performance at G.C.E. (A.L) thus raising the percentage of high performers to 81.9. This in effect argues a strong case for the establishment of AUCs, for undoubtedly, the predominant majority of these students deserve the opportunity to receive a higher education. At the same time, the fact that

none of the excellent performers are enrolled in AUCs, is very likely to allot a second class status to AUCs in the hierarchical structure of Sri Lankan tertiary education.

We inquired from the respondents the reason for selecting the course of studies that they had selected at G.C.E. (A.L), in this instance, commerce. Their responses are given below. (Table 6)

Table 6

**Reasons for Selecting a Course of Study at G.C.E. (A/L)**

Reasons	No	%
1 I was good in these subjects	13	18.1
2 I liked these subjects	30	41.7
3 My parents advised me to choose this course	1	1.4
4 Opportunities for employment are better in this area	8	11.1
5 All my friends selected this course	--	--
6 This was the only course of study available in my school	1	1.4
7 I wanted to get into a job with high social prestige	19	26.4

According to the above table the highest percentage (41.70%) of the students had chosen this course of study due to interest. Secondly the students appeared to be keenly concerned about the link between their studies and job opportunities as a total of 37.5 percent had been attracted to their course of studies due to the employment prospects and social prestige of the job which will be open to them in due course. A surprising factor is that none had been influenced in their selection by the preferences of friends and only one by parental advice. The above information clearly indicates an awareness on the part of the students about the important role education is expected to play in paving way for employment.

Before joining the AUCs, 28 out of the 72 or 38.9 percent had followed the courses listed below. The majority of these courses are seen to be courses relevant to the field of study followed by them at G.C.E. (A.L).

Table 7

**Courses Followed Prior to Joining the AUC**

	Course	No
1	Sri Lanka Chartered Accountancy	8
2	Accountancy	3
3	English	4
4	National Diploma in Business Studies	6
5	Motor Mechanism	7
6	Higher Diploma in Accountancy	3
7	Management	7
8	Higher National Diploma in Commerce	1
9	Electrical Technician	1
10	National Certificate in Business Studies	1
		<u>31</u>

Only 13.9 percent of them had been employed prior to joining this course, but only three of them were in areas related to the field of study.

#### 4.4 Future Educational and Vocational Aspirations

The final section of the questionnaire probed into the educational and vocational aspirations of the respondents.

Table 8

**Reasons for Applying for the Present Course**

1	To get a higher education to get a good job/It is easy to get a job in this area	19
2	It seemed suitable for me	5
3	Interest in pursuing an education in this area	14
4	To get a higher education	20
5	Because I could not gain admission to a University	6
6	Need to continue education/cannot afford to follow any other course	6
7	1 + 3	1
8	5 + 1	1
		72

The above table points out that three main reasons have impelled students to apply for this course. The first is a general reason, the need to get a higher education, which reveals the high social demand for higher education in the country. Secondly, there was a perception that a higher education equips a person for employment opportunities. Thirdly, a considerable proportion of students (14 out of 72) indicated an interest in the area of studies selected.

The respondents expressed a desire to continue their education even after completion of this course. Surprising though it was to find that a preponderance of respondents (91.6 percent) had indicated this desire, the courses which they had listed as being interested in following later explained the reason for such a desire. Thus while all the students who responded in this survey had followed a Commerce course at G.C.E. (A.L), they aspired to follow higher education courses related to Business Studies (Commerce, Management, Accountancy) subsequently (Table 9).

Table 9

**List of Courses which the Respondents Wish to Follow in the Future**

Course	No
Accountancy	39
Management	5
Degree in Commerce	9
English	2
University Degree	7
A Course higher than the present	6
Computer course	7
Undecided	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>

The above table indicated that the young respondents had specific, clear educational and vocational aspirations.

In view of the general perception that the private sector appears as offering greater employment opportunities, more attractive employment with regard to various perquisites such as higher salaries and other benefits, we questioned the respondents about the sector in which they would like to get employed upon the completion of their studies (Table 10).

Table 10

Sector	No	%
Public	64	64.6
Corporation	15	15.2
Private	16	16.2
Self Employment	4	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The total includes 3 who gave all four sectors, 7 who gave 3 sectors and 4 who gave 2 sectors.

The above responses were in contrast to the general opinion about employment opportunities. The responses, to some extent, may be explained by the fact that the sample in the survey was primarily rural who may still favor the public sector employment due to its guarantee of security. This hunch was endorsed by the responses to the questions that followed the reason for the above preference (Table 19), for at the top of the list, 19 had mentioned security. It is worthy of note, that 23 years after the publication of the Seers Report (ILO 1971) the situation regarding employment sector preference had not changed. Five others who were drawn to the public sector by the pension, were also indirectly attracted by the prospect of security.

Table 11

**Reasons for Preferring a Certain Employment Sector**

Reason	No
Security	27
Suitable for me	12
Interest	10
No reason given	8
To be of service	6
Pension	5
High remuneration	3
Because I need a job	3
It is easier	2
More opportunities	2
Freedom	1
Already employed in a corporation	1
Can pursue higher education while working	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>



Some respondents had given more than one reason. The reason given by the second highest number (12) was that 'it is suitable for me' which probably indicates that the respondents had tried to compare their own dispositions to the characteristics which they perceive associated with different sectors. While some of them may have been impelled in their choice of a sector by interest, ten others had directly declared that they liked the sector which they chose.

The vocational aspirations of respondents are closely related to their educational aspirations. They aspired for jobs in the same fields in which they interested in continuing their education, Accountancy, Management and Commerce or related fields such as Banking.

When queried as to why they preferred the jobs specified above, most of the responses given were those that could be expected. It is noteworthy that 25 felt the jobs preferred were relevant to the field of study while another 16 declared that they were interested in the jobs specified by them.

Table 12

<b>Job Preferences of Respondents</b>	
Preference	No
Accountancy	42
Suitable for education	12
Bank job	3
Executive/administrative job	2
Commerce field	2
Teaching	2
Management area of the Colombo share market	1
Management field	1
Any job	1

The above job preferences indicate that the preferences are mainly linked to their course of study. Only 15 out of the 72 were 'a job suitable for education' (12), 'any job' (1) and executive/administrative job (2) These few students may have influenced by the perception of opportunities in the labour market for those aspiring for high level jobs.

### **5.0 Affiliated University Colleges: The Beginning of a Binary System of Tertiary Education?**

A comparison of the findings of the present study with those of prior research reveals similarities as well as dissimilarities. Previous studies have documented the trend of increasing participation of students from lower socio-economic background in University education and it is seen that the AUCs drawing predominantly from the lower middle and lower classes have contributed to a broadening of this access. The stratification by courses of study according to socio-economic background discerned at university level was not evident in this study because all the students in the sample had enrolled in the same course of study.

In secondary school experience, and the course of study followed, these students were more akin to university students following Arts oriented courses.

Vocational preferences were seen to lie mostly in the area related to their course of study but these preferences were influenced by the need for security, the need to get employment than the pursuit of high social status or remuneration. In this respect, there was a close relationship between this study and that carried out by Sundar et al (1983).

When the background characteristics or socio-economic status is taken together with the educational achievement of these students we see the possible emergence of a binary system. The fact that these colleges attract students with a moderate level of performance, lower in achievement than the university entrants and that many in the present sample mainly desire jobs in the fields of Accountancy or a job suitable for education indicate possible demands that may arise in the future. It is especially pertinent to note that although it was envisaged that AUCs would offer non-traditional courses, students seem to link their AL stream of study, Commerce, to areas in the employment market such as Management, Accountancy and Banking.

With an interest in continuing their higher education and in the hope of getting into professional jobs in the field, it is likely that these students may soon demand university or degree conferring status for their institutions. Especially when their socio-economic status, lower level of education and lower status of the institutions as compared with universities are juxtaposed, the students may grow restive in the binary system that appears to have emerged.

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